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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY POL/ECON REPORT - March 07, 2008

¶1. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk.

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##### Civil Society

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#### ¶2. Opposition Leader Detained Seven Times in Two Days

Police detained For Freedom movement leader Aleksandr Milinkevich seven times during his tour of Brest Oblast. On February 29, traffic police stopped his vehicle four times on the way to his destination, and ordered him to appear at a police station for questioning the same day following an unsanctioned meeting. Police again stopped his car near Kobrin on March 1, but Milinkevich refused to go to the station, continuing his tour on foot. Police then questioned him for one hour after his meeting in Kobrin. The leader was released without charge and noted that authorities were apparently "lost" and unsure how to deal with him.

#### ¶3. Protestants and Youth Warned About Activities

Mozyr authorities issued a warning February 29 to the Jesus Christ Protestant community. Local ideology and police officers visited their church service, collected passport information of parishioners, and warned the community about engaging in political activities. The pastor filed a complaint with the prosecutor's office and local authorities. Separately, Mozyr university administration March 3 warned opposition youth Yekaterina Manchuk

against contacts with democratic activists. The police had previously detained Manchuk and associates February 16 after linking her activities to the unregistered political organization Belarusian Christian Democracy. Authorities at that time threatened Manchuk with expulsion and a jail term.

#### 14. Soligorsk Small Business Activist Jailed

A Soligorsk district court sentenced entrepreneur Vladimir Shilo March 4 to 15 days in jail for participating in an unsanctioned rally. Two days earlier, Shilo had spoken at a rally to protest new small business regulations. The police dispersed the demonstration and detained nine activists, releasing everyone but Shilo without charges.

#### 15. Catholics Urge Return of Former Monastery

The St. Joseph Roman Catholic community collected over 3,000 signatures March 3 urging the return of Minsk's former Bernardine monastery. The petition calls upon the GOB to abolish plans to convert the building into a hotel and entertainment center. The community continues to hold daily prayers outside the monastery. Meanwhile, the Constitutional Court March 2 rejected a separate 50,000-signature petition pushing for religious laws amendments. The court maintained it could initiate changes only upon requests from the President and GOB, but not from individuals. The GOB-backed Belarusian Orthodox Church supported the current laws governing religion, and warned its believers against endorsing the petition.

#### 16. Opposition Youth Detained and Harassed

A Minsk district court March 5 sentenced youth activist Maksim Sergeyets to five days in jail. The police detained Sergeyets the previous day and charged him with violating regulations governing

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mass events by distributing leaflets for a March 25 demonstration. In a separate incident on March 2, the police seized Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Gramada" activist Ales Streltsov at gunpoint in downtown Minsk while he was unfolding a "Freedom for Kozulin" sign. Streltsov's associate Aleksey Morozov escaped the scene, and Streltsov himself was released without charge.

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Domestic Economy  
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#### 17. Ukraine to Cooperate on Nuclear Power Plant Project

Belarusian Deputy Premier Vladimir Semashko announced February 29 that Ukraine plans to cooperate in securing servicing equipment and fuel for Belarus' planned nuclear power plant and in handling nuclear waste. Following a session of the Ukraine-Belarus Cooperation Committee, Semashko said Belarus' government signed a contract with Ukraine's Atomproekt to draft a feasibility study for the plans. Semashko's counterpart in the Ukrainian government Aleksandr Turchinov said Ukraine is ready to support Belarus in this construction project.

#### 18. Government Adopts 2008 State Employment Program

The Belarusian Council of Ministers announced March 5 the adoption of its 2008 State Employment Program. The program aims to lower the unemployment rate in 36 small Belarusian cities and to provide 148,300 unemployed people with benefits. A total of 155,000 jobs are to be created in 2008 under the program, including 22,100 in small cities and 5,200 in rural areas. As many as 2,500 individuals seeking to start their own businesses are to receive financial assistance from the Fund for the Social Protection of the Population. The central government allotted USD 83 million to implement the program.

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International Trade  
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¶9. China to Invest USD 700 Million in 2008

The Presidential Administration announced February 29 that China plans to invest USD 700-800 million in Belarus' economy in 2008. If the plans come to fruition, bilateral trade will reach approximately USD 2 billion, double the amount in 2006. In addition, the Administration announced plans to open a Consulate General in Shanghai some time this year.

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¶10. Quote of the Week  
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Secretary of the Central Electoral Commission Nikolay Lozovik,

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observing that Belarusian opposition politicians are sore losers compared to opposition members in Russia:

"The only difference is that [opposition] politicians there acknowledged the victory of the leader in Russia and are not intent on destabilizing the social and economic situation in their country. Unfortunately, the situation here is different.... Belarusian [opposition] politicians need to learn not only how to win, but also how to lose."

Stewart